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RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ MAR LIMA 3284
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 8789
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 3899
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL 3454
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 001642

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TAGS: [KJUS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#) [SNAR](#)
SUBJECT: URIBE THROWS DOWN THE GAUNTLET IN LA MACARENA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Milton K. Drucker.
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) President Uribe's frustration with another FARC attack on the security cordon protecting manual eradicators in La Macarena resulted in his reported comment February 16 that he would bomb areas of the park. The February 15 FARC attack killed six police officers and was the third major attack against manual eradication efforts launched on January 19, itself in response to a FARC attack that killed 29 soldiers in the area. The eradication effort faces significant security and logistical challenges, exacerbating the inefficiency of the project. U.S.-supported aerial eradication has sprayed over 21,000 hectares of coca so far in 2006. The manual eradication effort in La Macarena has cleared about 500 hectares so far, according to the presidency. END SUMMARY.

HITTING THE FARC WHERE IT HURTS

¶2. (C) FARC snipers on February 15 killed six police officers as they conducted a reconnaissance patrol in advance of deploying manual eradicators to that area. In response to this attack--the third major attack on the police security unit since January--President Uribe said he would order the bombing of select areas of the Sierrania de La Macarena National Park, reaffirming the government's commitment to the eradication operation. President Uribe launched the manual eradication effort in the park last month in response to a FARC attack that killed 29 soldiers in the area. Colombian security forces in the La Macarena area, a long-time FARC bastion located in Meta Department, have conducted counterinsurgency operations there since 2003, but did not engage in counternarcotics operations. However, by mid-January over 1,200 police were deployed to the region to provide security for over 900 eradicators as they began their mission. Uribe has since ordered the deployment of an additional 1,500 security forces to the Park.

¶3. (C) The presidency's Social Action office runs the manual

eradication program in cooperation with the police, who are providing the bulk of the security. The program, called &Operation Colombia Verde,⁸ divides an area east of the Sierra de La Macarena into five areas for eradication. The first phase of eradication is being conducted in an area along the border between Meta and Guaviare Departments, close to the capital city of Guaviare, San Jose de Guaviare. The decision to launch the operation here was based on its proximity to San Jose, the expectation that the FARC would be caught off guard, and the relatively moderate FARC presence in that area. Social Action representatives have been sent to the area to report progress back to the president's office.

ERADICATORS FACE DAUNTING TASK

¶4. (C) Security has been the biggest challenge facing the eradicators. FARC dominance in the La Macarena gives the insurgents an advantage, which they have used to launch at least three major attacks against the security forces protecting the eradicators. The two security rings surrounding the eradicators are kept in static positions, and are instructed to protect the eradicators, limiting their ability to engage FARC forces in the area. FARC attacks have resulted in twelve police deaths so far, and contributed to the high rate of turnover among eradicators. The presence of landmines in this area also impedes rapid eradication and poses a threat to the safety of eradicators.

¶5. (C) The eradication effort has faced significant logistical challenges as well. The GOC dropped one month's worth of supplies into the eradication zone at the onset of the operation, but lacked the mechanisms to transport these supplies within the zone. As a result, the eradicators had to transport supplies and move camps themselves, resulting in multiple injuries, particularly to the eradicators' knees, and a slowdown in operations.

¶6. (C) Security needs associated with the GOC's anti-terrorist efforts and election preparations also slow down manual eradication. Rural police units, most of which are currently guarding the eradicators, are often the first to respond to an attack, secure infrastructure, and provide security to electoral candidates. General Baron, director of Colombia's anti-narcotics police, told Embassy officers in early February that these units would be pulled to provide security for the elections, probably by the end of the month.

¶8. (C) The difficulties facing the eradication effort have taken their toll on the eradicators. About two-thirds of the eradicators have quit since the operation began last month, citing poor organization, inadequate health care, slow payment, and the security situation as reasons for their resignation. Operation Colombia Verde planners noted in a meeting early February that morale among the eradicators was low and decided to reduce the number of eradication teams almost by half in an effort to improve security for the remaining teams. In addition, planners intend to use helicopters to transport eradication teams between zones, saving them long hikes. Uribe on February 12 made his second visit to La Macarena since the eradication effort began and promised the remaining 310 eradicators that he would provide them housing subsidies if they remained with the program to its conclusion, but also indicated he would have to research the legal requirements that would allow him to fulfill that promise.

ASSESSING THE OUTCOME

¶9. (C) Initial reports indicate that on average 20 hectares are being cleared daily. However, little verification of these numbers has occurred, and results in some areas may be exaggerated. For example, in the area of Otanche, observers report that 35 hectares are being cleared daily, which suggests each eradicator is clearing almost half a hectare

per day. To achieve this rate of clearing, the 84 eradicators operating there would have to pull up one coca plant every five seconds for eight hours straight, when in reality much time is spent walking from field to field and to the base camp. As the eradication effort moves into less hospitable zones, the ability to achieve rapid results will diminish. The police have indicated they expect the President's office to take charge of measuring and reporting on eradicated areas, while the President's office has indicated it expects the police to take responsibility for that task. As of February 14, the manual eradication effort in the park had eliminated 500 hectares of coca.

¶10. (C) GOC officials managing the eradication effort may be reconsidering what constitutes a successful mission and how to achieve those goals. National Police Director General Jorge Daniel Castro Castro held a meeting with his officer corps and other officials responsible for the eradication effort in early February to examine why the effort had achieved lackluster results thus far. Castro emphasized to them that the Macarena had become a symbol of manual eradication and they had to find ways "not to let this great operation fail." While Uribe has pledged to stay in Macarena until "there is not one coca plant left in the park," attendees at the Castro meeting made a strategic decision not to clean the areas totally of coca, but to focus on a nuclei of more productive, heavy density crops.

COMMENT: POLITICS PLAYING ROLE

¶11. (C) This particular eradication effort carries with it symbolic and political significance. Taking the fight to the FARC's heartland underscores Uribe's commitment to pressure the insurgents militarily, but has also highlighted the FARC's equal commitment to protect its sources of income.

While FARC forces can flee a counterinsurgency operation, the cost of abandoning coca fields is higher. Manual eradication has proven effective in some areas, but the poor security and logistical situation hinders the efficiency of this method in La Macarena. U.S.-supported aerial eradication has sprayed over 21,000 hectares of coca so far in 2006, compared to the estimated 500 cleared in La Macarena. General Castro stated in the same meeting with his officer corps and other officials responsible for the eradication effort that Europeans speak out against aerial fumigation, and that manual eradication was a clear indication that we are not just tools of the United States.⁸

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